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Attention is focused on the 10-year (grades 3-12) Spanish sequence in the Hackensack schools. Program expenses, student test scores, and a subjective evaluation of the project's effectiveness are included. Also discussed are enrollment trends, students who discontinue studying Spanish, the transference value of language skills, and the reasons for selecting Spanish as the sequence language. (AF)

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The Foreign Language Program In Hackensack Public Schools

(as presented at the 1967 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages by George B. McClellan, Ph.D., Superintendent of Schools)

Perhaps the question most frequently asked about any unusual educational program is, "how much does it cost?" The specific question here is, "can the cost of a foreign language program be justified in terms of educational values?" Let me share with you an analysis of financial and educational factors as they pertain to Hackensack, a city of 35,000 people.

Offering instruction in Spanish to 1400 elementary students from grades three to six in the 1966-1967 school year costs Hackensack $38,105.47. This represents 0.84% of the total school budget with an average cost per student of $25.52. Since a good language program requires continuity with upper levels of instruction, one must also include the financial impact on the junior and senior high school. The expenditure for the entire language sequence, grades 3-12, was $87,426.43. This is not, however, a true comparative cost with other school systems. To arrive at a more realistic figure, Hackensack's Foreign Language Program was compared with those of other districts which offer only a five or six year sequence. This comparison reveals that Hackensack, as a probable result of its elementary program, has 7% more students of foreign languages at the junior-senior high school levels than school systems where foreign language study is begun at either grades seven or eight. Thus, the cost of the complete sequence, over and above the normal language program at the junior and senior high school levels is $9119.18. The total foreign language sequence, grades 3-12 costs $47,244.65 more than the typical program. This represents 1.09% of the total school budget.

Are we getting our money's worth? Briefly stated, the goals of our foreign language program are: to develop student fluency in Spanish; and to give them a knowledge and understanding of Spanish and Latin American culture. The first evaluation of high school seniors who had taken the entire sequence was in 1964, after the program had been in effect for ten years. They were administered the Modern Language Association Cooperative Foreign Language Test. The modal percentile scores of the language continuants in the four subtests were: listening comprehension, 99; speaking, 99; reading, 90; writing, 99. This year, in order to compare our seniors with those who had taken the typical four year program the same test was administered. This was possible because the High School receives from other districts where the elementary program is not given. The student with the ten year program scored as high as in previous testings and averaged 65 percentiles higher than regular 4th year Spanish students. Unfortunately, the groups were not similar enough in native ability to make the comparison completely valid. The comparison does show, however, that students with continuous language study are very much superior in language performance.

Perhaps the following subjective evaluation reported to me best interprets the results of the language sequence: Students are able to understand without difficulty everything said by the teacher in class. They understand the pronunciations of Spanish-speaking people who have difference accents. (I'm told there is quite a difference in the Spanish spoken by Castillians, Caribbeans and South Americans). Students are able to understand Spanish documentary movies with relative ease and they speak with facility with students who have just arrived from Latin American countries. Many of our students have had the opportunity to travel to Latin American countries and they reported no difficulty in communicating with people from all walks of life, with the exception of a few taxi drivers. The pronunciation of 95 per cent of the students is near native and the students are able to discuss anything in the foreign language, from ordering a meal to advanced Spanish literature. Fifty percent of the students are able to speak Spanish at a native rate of speed. The culture of Spanish speaking people has become a part of the knowledge of students. Hackensack is experiencing a large influx of people from Latin America. Students take a sincere interest, in both the junior and senior high schools, in new students who have just arrived from Latin American countries. The fact that our students communicate with them in their native language and know their culture eliminates many possible misunderstandings. The majority of our senior language students have a better command of Spanish than most candidates who come to us for interviews for positions as Spanish teachers.

The people of Hackensack apparently favor the total foreign language sequence. In the last few years they have been able to witness practical results of the program. Their children have been selected to serve as bilingual guides at the World's Fair, to receive foreign study scholarships and to fill various positions where bi-lingualism is a necessity. Recently, many Hackensack families have become extremely active in acting as host families for foreign visitors.

Each year the number of students continuing their study of foreign language through the high school is increasing. This year there are 37 students in continuing Spanish in their senior year, 21 more than in 1964.

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Next year we project that 60 of our pupils will be completing the full ten year foreign language sequence by enrolling in continuing French IV. In addition, next year in order to accommodate students who, because of scheduling problems and college requirements, cannot continue studying a foreign language in their senior year, we are offering a social studies course which will be taught entirely in French. (Our seniors next year will be one of the groups which had French in the elementary school.) This course will give eleven more students the opportunity to continue in French and at the same time fulfill other requirements. This also represents a newer trend of curriculum by breaking through traditional departmental categories.

What does the student who drops Spanish gain from his experience, for some of the students will elect to drop Spanish in high school? Upon graduation, many will go to work in factories and industries in the area. A great majority of them will be working with the numerous Spanish-speaking people. The fact that they have had the opportunity to know the language and culture of their co-workers will lead, we hope, to better understanding.

The skills required to learn one foreign language are transferable to the learning of a second foreign language. There are many students in Hackensack who have attempted a second, and in some cases even a third, foreign language. In most cases they became fluent in less time in the new language than in the first. Presently there are eleven juniors, all continuants of French programs, who are receiving a grade of "A" in Spanish III, after covering the materials of Spanish I and II in five months, on their own without credit.

One of the questions most frequently asked is, "Does the inclusion of a foreign language program harm learning in other areas?" According to our studies, it does not harm achievement in other standard school subjects. The course content of foreign language has a high correlation with social studies, music, mathematics and even reading. There is evidence, although no formal study has been done, that students have been helped a great deal in phonics through their study of the sound system of a foreign language. One study of comparative achievement of two similar third grade groups of equal ability, one studying Spanish and the other not, revealed no difference in achievement between the groups in other subjects. In this study, the students with language received five fewer minutes of instruction a day in four major academic subjects.

Our present elementary students are studying Spanish. We chose Spanish because of the extensive contact which the United States has with the Spanish-speaking world. In addition, Hackensack has a nucleus of Spanish-speaking population. Selection of Spanish for the elementary grades has done much to improve intra-community relations. Good materials and resources are available in Spanish. Also, there appears to be a sufficient supply of qualified teachers.

At one time, Hackensack offered Spanish and French, one alternating with the other every two years. But the administration of both became cumbersome and French in the elementary schools was dropped. Also, the small number of teachers certified in the two languages made the alternating program impracticable.

Students in Hackensack begin studying Spanish in the third grade. It is reported that at this level they enjoy hearing and producing new sounds, have few if any pre-established prejudices towards a foreign culture and have fewer inhibitions to restrict their language learning. Third graders have the ability to imitate the sound pattern system of a foreign language more accurately than older children.

All of which leads to the question, again, "is a ten year sequence of language worth it?" Learning a foreign language takes time. With a ten year sequence students can achieve facility in understanding, speaking, reading and writing a foreign language. Its integration and correlation with other elementary subject areas make it feasible and practical. The very fact that young children are more flexible in language production seems to justify its existence. Fewer prejudices have a chance to develop. The fact that experience with one language facilitates learning of additional foreign languages, should overcome the question of "which language?"

With all of the preceding in mind, the investment of 1.09% of the school budget does appear to be "worth it." The $1.24 it costs each resident of Hackensack for the program is high but, to most, justified in light of our students having the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of a different language and culture. The skills students have shown after the total language sequence proves that public schools can teach foreign language efficiently and economically.

The subject of this panel was given as "Administrators, Friend or Foe?" This presentation shows that we, if given the facts and results, can never be considered as "foe."